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ABSTRACT

Silent students are often actively involved in classroom learning despite appearances to the contrary, and teachers can use special instructional strategies to guide them to overt participation. Students with "communication apprehension" are often assumed to have low intelligence, but they may suffer instead from shyness, various communication skills deficits, social alienation, or low social esteem. The educational handicap of silence stemming from causes other than low intelligence can be overcome when teachers use the following teaching strategies to guide silent participants into speech: (1) engage the students in a study of the functions of silence as part of language; (2) develop alternative ways to obtain student responses; (3) establish routines by which silent students can indicate readiness to answer or the need for clarification; and (4) develop student collaborations and communities of learning. (MHC)

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# SILENT PARTICIPANTS:

# UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' NONORAL RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

Silent Participants: Understanding Students' Nonoral Responses

Discusses the characteristics of comprehending silent participants and strategies for teaching them how to signal understanding and participation. The general term for students' classroom silence is communication apprehension, a situationally specific social difficulty for many children and adults. Because oral language is essential to classroom learning, silent students suffer from a clear academic handicap because their behavior is misinterpreted as low intelligence, alienation, or lack of skills. Four teaching strategies are discussed: identifying the sources of students' silence, developing alternative means for obtaining students' responses, setting routines for students to indicate their participation, and developing student collaborations and communities of learning.

# SILENT PARTICIPANTS: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' NONORAL RESPONSES

> As far as school is concerned, I don't know what it is or was to cause me to become so quiet in class. It's very hard for me to make my views public to a whole class. I am able to state my views in a small group though. This is an improvement because I also remember breaking up into small groups in grammar school and high school and me not saying a word to the group. I've learned to grow accustomed to not speaking in class and having my grades being affected because of lack of participation. I really couldn't blame the teachers because how would they know that I knew the material if I didn't participate in class.
>
> --Mary Ann, graduate student, 1984

There are many students who fear speaking out in class. And like Mary Ann, they agonize over their problem and excuse teachers who impose penalties for their silence. The general attitude of some educators concerned with communication apprehension supports teachers' beliefs that silence during lessons deters effective classroom learning, and they recommend activities for making speakers out of silent students. The contention in this paper, however, is that many silent students are actively involved in lessons, and teachers can use procedures that let silent students indicate their participation and

understanding.

## COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

Students may be silent during lessons for several reasons. These quiet ones may have communication skills deficits, social introversion or anxiety (shyness), social alienation, ethnic or cultural divergence, low intellect, or low social esteem (Glaser, 1981; Kelly, 1982; McCroskey, 1980). The general term for students' classroom silence is communication apprehension (CA). The problems in identifying CA students and the instructional implications among its various definitions or subcategories, however, do not seem to be discrete, and silent periods for any CA individual may vary according to the activity and its situation (Bell, 1986; Hittleman, 1985; Honig, 1987). Most CA is not pathological; it is a situationally specific social difficulty for children in which "some situations increase chances that a child will act shy" (Honig, 1987, p. 58). In other words, a silent student may exhibit CA during a whole-class social studies discussion but be vocal during a resource or learning center math lesson.

Because an ability to understand and use both oral and written language in social situations is essential to reading development, students' with CA "suffer from a clear academic handicap" (Adler, 1980, p. 215). "Learning in classroom occurs through and is embedded in the interpersonal communication between teacher and students and among students" (Puro & Bloome,

1987, p. 29). Teachers transmit much classroom instruction orally--general information, instructions, questions--so students must complete the process by using speech to show understanding or ask for clarifications (Friedman, 1980).

## SILENT PARTICIPANTS

The concept of the silent participant has evolved from interactions with students at all learning levels--elementary through graduate--in regular and special education classrooms and clinic situations. There has been a growing realization that students' silences do not always indicate shyness or lack of information (Hittleman, 1985). Quiet students in small groups at all levels answer questions they would not answer in large ones, and seemingly silent students discuss reading assignments more readily with their peers than with the teacher. Mary Anne's journal entry was in response to a graduate class discussion of these silences. She continued (Mary Ann, 1984):

> Sometimes I get really frustrated because I'd love to say something. I also feel that it is something I must try to overcome. Many times my shyness makes me feel silly & immature. I also feel as if I have a handicapping condition. I know you don't have a handicap unless it affects your everyday life and sometimes I feel as if it does. I'm really not sure whether it is shyness or a lack of assertiveness. But, whatever it is, it does have

debilitating affects.

Mary Ann then described a frustrating year trying to participate in a Master of Arts program in liberal education in which oral discussion was mandated. Although her written work and tests were satisfactory, she was dropped from the program because she was quiet during class discussions. During another graduate class discussion about silent participants, a student who was always silent during class discussions began to speak out in class after identifying with Mary Ann. She indicated, "Once I knew it was all right not to talk, it was easier to speak."

Who are the comprehending silent participants? They are students who are cognitively engaged in a lesson although they do not orally participate in either large or small group lessons. They are characterized by one or more nonverbal behaviors of attentiveness. These include body turning to face speakers, facial responses to others' statements, active notetaking, forward body thrust as if eager to speak, and active silent searching of text for information or answers. They often participate in spontaneous conversation with peers and with teachers individually or in small group lessons that lack the aura of a testing situation. It results from either (1) differences about the meaning of silence in their and the school's culture, (2) apprehension about communicating within large groups, or (3) the cognitive need for extended time in processing questions and formulating answers.

The issue of nonoral participation that is indicative of low cognitive functioning, alienation, or lack of strategies for understanding is not the major focus this paper's discussion. Low functioning students need a variety of curriculum adaptations--materials, instructional presentations, directions, and reinforcement (Division of Special Education, 1987). Alientated students may be demonstrating stylized cultural responses (Gilmore, 1985) or pathological problems (Ivey & Simer-Downing, 1980). Students lacking strategies for comprehending text need guided comprehension instruction and procedures for constructing and reconstructing author's messages (Hittleman, 1988). Attention to those causes for silence is educationally important, but the purpose here is to explain instructional strategies to use with silently participating students.

## INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

In working with silent participants, teachers should use intentional interventions to develop individual students' strategies for participating overtly in lessons. The idea of direct, purposeful interactions between a teacher and student is not new and there is strong evidence that student achievement results from teachers who take the role of a strong leader. Also, individualizing students' learning does not mean that each student must receive one-to-one instruction. Individualization occurs when teachers design instruction to meet students' needs whether or not they are working alone or as part of a group. Effective teachers provide directed instruction which consists of

a predictable sequence of demonstration, guided student practice, feedback and corrections, and independent practice (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1984).

Four strategies for teaching the comprehending silent participant are proposed. The first is the study of the functions of silence in the communication process--understanding the source(s) of silence and the effect of attention to silence in social situations. The second is the development of alternative ways for obtaining students responses--restructuring lesson presentations and forms of student responses. The third is a set of routines for students to indicate their level of participation--indicating when they are ready to answer or their need for help. The fourth is the development of student collaborations and communities of learning.

## The Functions of Silence

In all cultures, silence has one or more functions. It is part of the language, the communication process. At times silence can mean respect, at others, disrespect. Silence can denote lack of knowledge, inadequacy with a language, or anger. Silence also can be means for emphasizing a message. In classrooms, teachers need to recognize silent periods when no communication is occurring, silence which serves to structure communication or which is socially prescribed--phenomena of an individual's culture (Saville-Troike, 1985), and the silence of a silent participant.

In the study of silence's function within the communication process, teachers and students examine the sources of silence and the effect of attention to silence in social situations. Some functions of silence which can be studied are:

1. Silence as part of public and religious rituals.

2. Silence as a means of respect.

3. Silence in familiar and unfamiliar social situations.

4. Silence required because of age, sex, or social position.

5. Silence by speakers and listeners during a conversation.

Literature--children's and adult--can be used to illustrate how silence is used and perceived in different settings. For example, teachers may want students to speak during lessons, yet at other times invoke the proverb, "Silence is golden." Some authors who have commented on silence are

Ecclesiastes: A time to keep silence, a time to speak.

La Rochefoucauld: Silence is the best tactic for him who distrusts himself.

Samuel Miller Hageman: Every sound shall end in silence, but the silence never dies.

Christina Georgina Rosetti: Silence more musical than any song.

Publilius Syrus: I have often regretted my speech, never my

silence.

Sydney Smith: He has occasional flashes of silence, that make his conversation perfectly delightful.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Three silences there are: the first of/ speech, /The second of desire, the third of/ thought; /This is the lore a Spanish monk,/ distraught/ With dreams and visions, was the first/ to teach. (The Three Silences of Molinos)

Books that can stimulate discussions about different kinds of silence include Taro Yashima's Crow Boy (Viking, 1955), Phyllis Krasilovsky's The Shy Little Girl (Houghton Mifflin, 1970), Sonia Levitin's A Sound to Remember (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, (1979), and Veronica Robinson's story about deafness, David in Silence (Lippincott, 1965).

## Alternative Responses and Signaling Routines

Since silent participating students are cognitively engaged in lessons without orally participating in class activities, they need alternative ways to respond and routines to indicate their level of participation. This means teachers should restructure some lesson presentations and the forms of student's responses. It does not mean rephrasing questions on the assumption that the first was not interpreted.

For example, students can point to the place in a text where

an answer is found; or, they can write its page, paragraph, and line number. Students can also demonstrate their understanding and participate with limited speaking by creating questions, which are distributed to other students. The silent participant is the one who verifies whether the others have answered appropriately.

Linked with these activities are various means that allow silent participants to indicate when they are ready to answer or their need for help. Routines can be set whereby students indicate if they (1) have an answer but are unsure about its accuracy, (2) are in the process of searching for an answer, or (3) do not know an answer and have little idea how to determine one (Hittleman, 1985). For example, students can have on their desks an object such as a small block with alternately colored sides. They turn up one color for a known answer, a second while searching, and a third to show they cannot form an answer.

After students become comfortable in overtly participating in lessons without speaking, teachers can begin guiding them into oral participation. One means for this is through structured situations, which promote asking questions and expressing ideas or confusions (Adler, 1980). For example, using an incomplete sentence model, teachers, in small groups, can guide students' oral participation by introducing statements for students' to complete. Some incomplete sentences are "I wonder...," "I wish I knew...," "[Story character] did [activity] because...," and "The story took place...."

Another means for leading students into oral participation is through one of the most salient features of social interaction, turn taking (Wilson & Zimmerman, 1986). The teacher structures turn taking by setting the parameters for the interaction because "turn taking is potentially problematic for those engaged in interaction when there is no prior arrangement providing for the order, lengths, or contents of turns" (p. 376). Guides for turn taking include arrangements for the speaking order and the response's length and content.

In one interpretation of silence, it is considered a result of the next speaker's action or inaction (speaking). This is a common occurrence in classrooms, when teachers indicate by some signal (a question or gesture) that a new speaker is expected. It is then up to the selected person to speak. When no response comes, as is the case with CA students, the teacher may rephrase the question or select another student. The silence, however, is seen as an undesired characteristic of the student.

In the turn taking model, silence is considered an interactionally generated phenomenon. A speaker may signal an end to his or her speaking, or at least a "transition-relevance" place (Wilson & Zimmerman, 1986, p. 378), which may be at the end of a word, phrase, clause, sentence, or longer utterance. The place depends on the speaking context and content. When a speaker comes to a transition place, several options develop in the social interaction: a) the speaker may select the next

speaker; b) the next speaker may self-select without hesitation; c) the speaker may continue when there is no next speaker; or, d) if the social interaction does not continue, the speakers may wait for a next speaker to self-select. Options c and d may result in periods of silence.

Teachers, in working with CA students, need to set up procedures for turn taking. In classrooms, option a is used extensively during lessons, and b occurs frequently as some students volunteer answers. Used with CA students, options c and d invariably produce silences that are often misinterpreted by teachers who do not understand the dynamics of turn taking. CA students should be told ahead of time when they will be selected, the expected length of their response, and some indication as to the form of their answer. The latter can be done by using structured situations so students know whether they should answer a question, ask a question, or indicate if they are confused. Turn taking should be introduced and practiced in small groups before CA students are invited to speak during whole-class lessons.

## Communities of Learning

Students' oral participation can be developed by setting up communities of learning. These communities may be dyads or small groups in which students cooperatively plan and conduct lessons. The groups promote peer interaction. Students discuss a story and get feedback from their peers about their oral and written

questions. Before students can self-guide and monitor their learning, teachers need to guide them through a series of lessons.

One procedure, peer-interaction grouping (Hittleman, 1983; 1988) uses the directed reading-thinking activity (DRTA) (Stauffer, 1975) and a 15-session structured procedure that begins with the teacher as owner, authority, and modeler of the interacting process and ends with the transfer of ownership, authority, and responsibility to the students (C. Hittleman, 1983). Peer-interaction groups are developed in three sets of five lessons each. In lessons 1 to 5, students as a class become aware of the DRTA format as the teacher models aloud what a reader might think and how decisions are made about setting a purpose for reading and creating questions. In lessons 6 to 10, students begin to experience being members of interaction groups and the teacher acts as observer and monitor, providing them with feedback about their actions. In lessons 11 to 15, students meet in groups, assume leadership for guiding their lessons, and monitor their learning.

Another community of learning procedure is reciprocal questioning, a procedure for developing students' ability to generate questions (Baker & Brown, 1984, Manzo, 1969, 1985, and Palincsar & Brown, 1986). Through reciprocal questioning, students, in small groups, learn to alternately teach and ask questions about a passage. The teacher begins as the model of teaching and questioning behavior. Students are encouraged to

assume leadership by a teacher's question such as, "Who would like to try being the discussion leader?" The procedure is especially beneficial to CA students because it improves their comprehension and provides them with the chance for active learning and participation in a nonthreatening situation.

Developing Competence

Students need to internalize these alternative responses, routines, and procedures for collaboration so they can be independent learners. To help students gain the competence to be independent, teachers should develop their skills so they not only use the strategies but recognize appropriate situations in which the strategies are to be used. This is accomplished by designing lessons based on four basic principles of communication competence:

1. Children must develop a repertoire of communication strategies for dealing with everyday communication situations.

2. Children need to acquire selection criteria that they can use to select from among the repertoire of strategies the most appropriate ones for any situation.

3. Children need practice in implementing their communication choices so that they can improve their effective delivery of them.

4. Children need experience in the effective evaluation of how well their communication met their goals and maintained their relationship with the other person (Wood, 1981, p. 293).

## CONCLUSION

Silent comprehending students are actively and silently participating in a lesson but are unable to speak out. Their needs must be recognized and understood. Teachers need to accept silent students on their level of participation and be prepared to guide them into oral lessons (Honig, 1987). Teachers of silent participants must use consistent, predictable routines and set realistic expectations. The students need to be included in social learning interactions in which student competition is de-emphasized, they are not ridiculed, and they do not need to put on a performance. Most important, when they do participate, teachers must listen to them with focused attention so they learn that their ideas are valued--a first step in helping silent participants deal with their communication apprehension.

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